THE RELIGIOUS CONCERN WITH POLITICS

By JOHN C. BENNETT

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John C. Bennett has been at Union Theological Seminary for seventeen years. He is now Reinhold Niebuhr Professor of Social Ethics and Dean of the Faculty. He began his teaching at Auburn Theological Seminary and for five years was at the Pacific School of Religion. Dr. Bennett is widely known as a scholar and foundation lecturer in the field of Christian social ethics. He is co-editor of the journal *Christianity and Crisis,* and author of several books, the latest of which are: *The Christian as Citizen, Christians and the State,* and *Christianity and Communism Today.*

The Religious Concern With Politics

One of the results of the discussion of religion in the 1960 Presidential campaign is that sometimes the impression has been created that religion is irrelevant to public life. The candidates on both sides were so eager to disengage themselves from religious controversy that they stated their case in a way which easily leads to the conclusion that religion is a private matter which has no effect, one way or another, on any citizen's opinions or commitments in the sphere of politics. Rejection of political sermons by Protestant preachers and of political directives from Puerto Rican Bishops, while entirely justified, was often put in such a way as to cause people to forget that voting is a moral act, as the Bishops said. Father Gustave Weigel in his illuminating lecture that was very reassuring to non-Catholics seemed to some readers, both Protestant and Catholic, to separate too completely the moral law from the positive law of the state. I believe that Father Weigel's position can be clarified so that this impression can be removed but the fact is that many did understand it in that way.

However, there must be some mistake, because each of the three religious communities that are represented here is obligated and inspired by its faith to seek to influence public life. The principle of separation of Church and State has not usually meant in this country that Churches and Synagogues should keep hands off the decisions and policies of the state. Each religious body has had its own way of relating itself to these decisions and policies and has had its own emphasis in regard to the range of issues in which it has been interested. Christians and Jews, Protestants and Catholics cannot limit religion to the sphere of private life. And politics are the instrument for making

many of our most fateful decisions in public life; decisions which also may have profound moral influence on private life.

What Difference Does Religion Make?

Father Weigel in one sentence in his important lecture has given us a clue that may help provide an initial answer to the question: "What difference does religion make?" After saying that the Catholic office-holder is not religiously bound to use the law of the land to impose the distinctively Catholic view of the moral law on the community as a whole, he says: "here he (the office-holder) takes his lead from the consensus of the community." This is quite right but the next question that we all must face is this: what influences form the consensus? I believe that the primary task of our religious communities and institutions is to raise the level of the consensus. It is this which may create better possibilities for political decision. It means a more sensitive public conscience on the most important issues. This dimension of our work is sometimes called "pre-political" but it is relevant to politics.

Our three religious communities differ on some matters of public policy. (I refuse to say "three faiths" though I recognize that sociologically the reference to three faiths may be permitted. I refuse to admit that Catholics and Protestants represent two faiths and, while it may be appropriate to think of Christianity and Judaism as two faiths: the kinship between them should be emphasized as Pope Pius XI did when at the height of the Nazi terror he said that we are all spiritually Semites.) There are a few areas on which Protestants and Catholics differ and there will con-

tinue to be tensions between them. In this country I think that the main differences between us are on problems in the sphere of sex and marriage, especially those that involve birth control and divorce, on medical ethics, on censorship, and on issues connected with education. There are differences among Catholics on the use of the law in regard to some of these questions which they regard as moral questions. There are shades of difference among Protestants on the educational issues. Jews and Protestants are close together on most of these matters though Jews are more united than Protestants in their objection to experiments which relate religion to public education. These various differences are important and we should not soft pedal them in inter-faith discussions but surely the areas of agreement are far more important. If this were not the case, our pluralistic experiment as a nation might not be viable.

Before I call attention to some of the areas of agreement, I must explain that on the larger public issues no one of our religious communities is agreed within itself. This creates its own problems but I think that there are two things that can be said about it. (1) Whenever disagreements cut across religious lines, they cease to divide the nation as deeply as would be the case if social and political conflicts coincided with religious differences. We may be thankful for the overlapping of our three religious communities, however much there may be differences within each of them. (2) My second comment is that our three traditions do bring common moral norms to our society by which not only our nation but also our churches and synagogues are themselves judged. The fact that all three of our communities have the Old Testament in common is of vast importance

for American life even though it is quite true that Christians and Jews differ in their ultimate interpretation of the Old Testament. In spite of these differences the prophets of Israel are masters of us all in our interpretation of public morality. The mind and heart of Abraham Lincoln were formed by the Bible. His memory is one of the unifying spiritual factors in our nation. He was not a member of a Church and yet it can be said of him, as Reinhold Niebuhr has said on many occasions, that he was America's greatest theologian. At least he understood the relation between God and the nation better than the more conventional theologians. He was able to express dimensions of faith which are Biblical, which can inspire us all, and which can correct many of the wrong uses of religion in each of our religious communities. His devout recognition that the nation lives under the judgment and mercy of God who transcends it and who cannot be possessed or used by it, and his understanding in the midst of a great conflict that neither side could claim God wholly for its cause bring to the fore religious insights which belong to all three of our religious communities. How different from the common habit of using religion to support the pride and self-righteousness of the nation.

Yes, there are significant differences on public issues within our religious communities. I know that among Protestants there is the difference between economic individualists who identify the practices of an earlier, unreformed capitalism with a Protestant ethic and there are those who have a strong sense of the community and of the moral obligations and opportunities of a community to direct its economic activities in the interests of social justice and of

the welfare of the people as a whole. There are all shades of differences among Protestants here. I find myself much closer on these issues to many Catholics and Jews than to many of my fellow Protestants. On the great issues of the cold war, on judgments concerning the best emphases and strategies in dealing with Communism, on the relative place to be given to the direct effort to reduce the danger of war through negotiation, through forms of disengagement and through disarmament, on the way in which the issues of internal security and civil liberties are weighed and related to each other there have been deep differences within each of our religious communities.

What are some of the moral norms and purposes which all of our religious communities bring to our national life? Each one of us, if he were to answer that question, would do so in his own distinctive way in the context of his own faith but my effort to give my own answer may stimulate your thought about your answers.

What We Have in Common

Churches and synagogues together should remind the national community that it belongs to God and is responsible to him, that its own will is not the highest law. There could be arguments among us about the status of our knowledge of the transcendent divine righteousness. There are among Protestants rebellions against stereotypes of the natural law, partly because non-Catholics tend to believe that Catholics know too much about the natural law and that they include within it injunctions which are not supported by the consciences of many Protestants or Jews and

partly because of the individualistic form of natural law (so alien to the Catholic understanding of natural law) that for generations prevented the American courts from recognizing the needs of an industrial society. But this rejection of stereotypes of the natural law should not mean the rejection of the righteousness of God which transcends our own righteousness. Surely there is a moral order which human laws do not create even though we may not be as optimistic as most of our predecessors about the dependability of our rational knowledge of it. There are differences here but they should not obscure what is common to our traditions in contrast to a secular moral relativism. It is well to be reminded that John Calvin for all of his dark view of fallen man had remarkable confidence in man's capacity to create and preserve a decent civil society, a capacity that was a gift of what he called "common grace." He even believed that all men could be trusted to know a great deal about the moral law. He refers to "that perpetual consent of all nations, as well as all individuals, to the laws, because the seeds of them are innate in all mankind, without any instructor or legislator." He says that "man is naturally a creature inclined to society, he has also by nature an instinctive propensity to cherish and preserve that society; and therefore we perceive in the minds of all men general impressions of civil probity and order. Hence it is that not a person can be found who does not understand, that all associations of man ought to be governed by laws, or who does not conceive, in his mind the principles of those laws." (*Institutes of the Christian Religion,* Bk. II, Chap. II, par. xiii) I confess that Calvin had a degree of confidence in the natural knowledge of the moral law which I do not

share. Our world is a much more broken world than Calvin's and the empirical grounds for questioning the reality of the perpetual consent of all nations to a transcendent law make me less optimistic than Calvin. Yet, I do believe that the objective moral order does press upon us even when we do not recognize it.

Some of us may be more pragmatic than others as we face particular problems. But it makes a vast difference if our pragmatism of method is our way of relating to each other, in particular circumstances, moral values and goals and principles which all have a claim upon us but which are in some measure in tension with each other; or if it is an unguided movement within a flux which includes no moral landmarks beyond the wills of men. Protestant and Jewish pragmatism and Catholic prudence may not be as different from each other as the differences in theoretical frames suggest.

Our traditions call us to a radical sense of justice which is not merely response to recognized rights and claims but the raising of the opportunities of all human beings everywhere to establish neglected rights and claims. Churches and synagogues alike are committed to a concentration on the neglected, the exploited, the defenseless people. We are committed to the stranger who is also the neighbor, to the poor of whom Amos spoke who are sold for a pair of shoes, to the least who are hungry and thirsty and naked and sick and in prison. There is in all of our traditions a bias in favor of the victims of society, in favor of all who cannot defend themselves. One of our problems arises when the defenseless of one period over-defend themselves in the next! Sometimes we are exhorted to have done with this

democratic levelling process because what is needed most is excellence. And yet we cannot even discover the sources of excellence until we raise up the people who have never had a chance to develop their capacities and to live a fully human life. I think that the greatest contemporary Protestant theologian, Karl Barth, puts the matter very well when he calls for commitment to the *human,* to man as against systems, ideologies, causes. As he says: "man has not to serve causes; causes have to serve man." (*Against the Stream,* p. 35)

We must defend the human being in God's name. This means that we must work for genuine equality of opportunity for all children of all races and classes and nations; that we must be concerned that people be protected against arbitrary government; that we must not allow the hostility against the prevailing ideology in another nation to hide the essential humanity of the people of that nation, including the people who believe in the ideology which we oppose; that we must be as much concerned to prevent nuclear war as we are to prevent the extension of Communism; that we must work for the humanizing of punishment and reclamation of offenders, young and old; that we must seek conditions favorable to the stability and health of the family. You may say that these are objectives that belong to the area of platitude and that the real questions have to do with method. We may indeed hope that such is the case. But there is a difference between the uses of platitude. One use is to emphasize it as an objective and seek to find an effective method by which it can be realized. The other is to use it as a cover for the lack of concern about relevant and effective methods. When a nation really agrees on

such goals as these; when it cares about them; when it wills the necessary means to them, it is much blessed. Insofar as our nation does *agree* and *care* and *will,* this is in large measure the effect in our corporate life of our religious traditions.

Dynamic Overlapping

I now want to guard against a misunderstanding that is always very near whenever we talk about the common elements in our religious traditions in an interfaith setting. I make a distinction between a moral and religious common denominator and what we might call the area of dynamic overlapping in the influence of our three religious communities and their traditions.

When we think in terms of a common denominator the danger is that this will become detached from its sources in the particular traditions, that it will become something that exists in and for itself, that it will then be given a kind of American sanction and become the fourth religion about which Will Herberg and many other critics of our culture speak. There is a danger that interfaith discussions may encourage this secularized fourth religion, that it may become an American religion, that it may lose both the inspiration and the correction which are available in each of our traditions.

In contrast to such an emphasis on the common denominator as a thing in itself, I think that we should emphasize the continuing influence of our Churches and Synagogues as they teach and live according to their distinctive traditions. There is a moral consensus but this always needs to be renewed and corrected by the historic faiths in their

fullness. Let each community of faith be true to itself, let each community of faith be dynamic as it touches our common life and let us rejoice that there is this area of overlapping that enables us to live together with much cooperation and mutual understanding on the level of moral decisions in the civil order. The continuous education of the American conscience by our three religious communities is our common responsibility. In emphasizing differences in traditions I am not suggesting that we should make a virtue of differing from one another in religious matters but the fact is that we do differ and it is not helpful to try to hide our differences and it is better to live within a whole tradition than within that part of it which can be held in common with those in the other two religious communities. The sources which we have in common are not in themselves enough to nourish our minds, our hearts or our consciences.

A Contribution to Freedom

One special contribution to the freedom of the spirit in our culture comes from the very fact that Churches and Synagogues are under no local or national authority. They exist in response to a divine revelation which local or national public opinion cannot control. They have close ties with Churches and Synagogues in other nations. Speaking as a Christian, I see a great resource for human freedom in the fact that no Church is a true Church unless it lives as part of a universal Church. The Roman Catholic knows where the center of that universal Church is; the Protestant may seem vague at this point. But religious freedom includes the opportunity of any Church to preserve its ties

with the larger Church in ways consistent with its own doctrine and polity.

In much of the discussion of the danger of having a Roman Catholic president the assumption has been made that being a Protestant Christian is an entirely innocuous occupation and that there could be no conflicts of conscience between a Protestant and the demands of public office. There is always the possibility that any conscientious office-holder may find that what is required of him stretches the limits of the morally tolerable in the light of his religious convictions. A factor which reduces the occasions for such a conflict is that faithfulness within the context of one's public responsibilities in the light of the limitation of real alternatives in a situation is itself one of the moral considerations which should guide the conscience. To withdraw from a situation in order to preserve one's own integrity and to leave the hardest actions to others may not be as high a road morally as it appears on the surface. But in rapidly changing and unpredictable circumstances conflicts may arise that call for withdrawal not only to preserve personal integrity but to warn government and nation against the results of disastrous decisions. Perhaps within the area of preparedness for nuclear war such an issue may appear even when one has rejected all stereotyped forms of absolute pacifism or nuclear pacifism. The prospect of an irreconcileable conflict between a man's religion and his public responsibilities may be quite remote in this country but it is part of the business of the Churches to keep the possibility of such a conflict alive. Freedom of conscience, without which the most precious elements in our American heritage would be lost, is sustained by membership in a

religious community which is not identical in members or in traditions or in sources of authority with the national community. It is for this reason that totalitarian governments always try to suppress or to domesticate the Churches. They know that it is much easier to control individuals one by one than to control a religious community that lives by a different faith than that of the state and which has the corporate toughness to resist the state.

I shall now speak of three specific problems which are often raised when we emphasize the influence of our religious communities on our common life. The first is the problem of how far a religious community should use its political influence to enact its own specific moral convictions into the law of the state. The second is the relationship of our religious communities to partisan politics in an election. The third is the role in a religiously pluralistic society of those who reject the traditional forms of religion.

Religious Discipline and the Law

It is a part of our religious liberty in a pluralistic society to be free to convert others to convictions which we regard as essential and this includes the moral convictions which separate our religious communities. I refer to convictions on such matters as birth control, the permissibility of divorce under some conditions and sterilization. Also in a somewhat different context we have differences concerning the regulations of gambling and the sale of liquor. Each religious group has a right to seek to persuade others in regard to all of these matters. On the other hand I believe that each community should be very restrained in its

approach to legislation that is designed to enforce its distinctive moral convictions on the whole community.

There is a broad consideration that applies to all legislation that is intended to control personal moral behavior. Where enforcement of the law depends on the active cooperation of most citizens in their daily decisions we soon come up against the limits of what law can accomplish. An alert minority may succeed in enacting a law which gradually secures support on the basis of its harmony with many public interests but unless that support is forthcoming it is likely to fail. The situation is most favorable where the law becomes almost self-enforcing through the publicized activities of institutions. There can be cheating in the enforcement of the federal laws which have set up the system of social security but these laws in the main create routines that come to be accepted by all parties. Even where there is very general agreement about questions of personal moral conduct, the religious group or the moralist must recognize the limits of law, and religious communities should not seek to turn all sins into crimes under the law of the state. Dean Roscoe Pound makes this point when he quotes these words from a fifteenth century Year Book: "Some things are for the law of the land, and some things are for the chancellor, and some things are between a man and his confessor." (*Law and Morals,* pp. 66-67)

Whatever may be said about the persuading of the community in order to win it to the special convictions of a particular Church, the most important emphasis now should be on the restraint of every religious group in using its political power to impose its moral convictions on the whole community against the will and the conscience of other

groups. Protestants have often been offenders here. This was true of Prohibition though this may have been more against the will than against the conscience of others. It is also true of some Sunday laws as they affect Jews. Non-Catholics today welcome the willingness of many Roman Catholics to say that, while they adhere to their moral convictions about the use of contraceptives as a part of the discipline of their own Church, they doubt if it is socially desirable to enact these convictions into the law of the state. They often say that the laws about birth control in Massachusetts and Connecticut were enacted by the Protestant conscience in the nineteenth century, and it is a fact that they have not sought to enact such laws in other states. Today the Protestant conscience and the Jewish conscience are generally opposed to those laws and Protestants and Jews are right in asking Roman Catholics to withdraw support from them.

Influence on Elections

What should be the relationship of religious bodies to partisan politics during an election campaign? In what I have said about the influence of religion upon political decision I have spoken of the indirect influence that is pre-political, that affects the moral assumptions and scale of values in the community. Does this mean that during an election Churches and Synagogues should keep hands off entirely? Is any interference in a particular election by religious leaders or religious bodies wrong in principle and incompatible with democracy? During the recent campaign much was said to indicate that the answer to this question must always be "yes." But I think that we should avoid

allowing the exigencies of one situation to box us in so that we are not free to recognize forms of action which may be required in another situation. The misuse of pulpits in connection with this election has caused many things to be said which threaten the freedom of the pulpit if an issue of grave moral importance is at stake in an election.

Our American party system with its two inclusive parties which do not represent doctrinaire positions makes it natural to assume that Churches should always be non-partisan. Though there is a difference in emphasis, especially on economic matters, between the tendencies of the two major parties, each party does include a wide spectrum of opinion even in that sphere—with Harry Byrd and Paul Douglas in one party and Barry Goldwater and Nelson Rockefeller in the other. It would be absurd to suggest that a Catholic or Protestant or Jew should as such be a Democrat or a Republican. Yet it is conceivable that in a political contest within one party an issue might arise that would call for guidance from Churches and Synagogues to their own members. A primary election in which one of the candidates is committed to white supremacy and segregation might be such an occasion.

I see no reason why we should assert that the leaders of a Church should never enter into a political conflict. The distinction that has been made by Vatican circles between what is appropriate in the United States and what may be appropriate in Europe is justified in part by the difference between our inclusive parties and the multiparty system in European countries. Should the Churches not have acted to warn their members against supporting the National Socialist party in Germany in its early days? And should

they not be on the alert to warn against any political movement or party that is dedicated to anti-Semitism, to white supremacy, to totalitarianism of the left or the right, or to an aggressive militaristic policy? I have spoken only of guidance by a Church to its own members. And even in the extreme cases of which I am thinking such guidance should involve condemnation of a political movement rather than the positive identification of the Church or of the symbols of religion with a political movement. I think that it is most unfortunate if any such guidance is combined with threats of a religious penalty and, in most cases where such a threat has been made in recent years, it has not been carried out. The ambiguity about whether or not disobedience to the directives of the Puerto Rican Bishops in the 1960 election was a sin was one reassuring aspect of that event. I have been speaking of extreme cases and I cannot foresee a situation in which any such case might arise in a contest between our two major parties. The right of a Church to make political judgments should not be denied but great restraint is required because when the passions of politics are combined with the passions of religion a nation becomes very sick indeed. The devil gets into political life when citizens of the same state are separated by absolute differences of conviction. Even if an absolute difference on one issue does arise, it is a source of healing if those same citizens belong together on other issues in the same churches and the same political organizations. For this reason religious parties are to be avoided at all costs.

Religious Pluralism and the Rejection of Religion

There is one dimension of our problem that I have not

mentioned: the relationship between our religious communities and our fellow citizens who reject all traditional forms of religion. Religious liberty includes the liberty to reject religion. It includes the liberty to teach atheism. Religious pluralism must provide room for the many forms of humanistic secularism which are often very critical of all three of the traditions represented here.

Our institutions depend upon freedom of thought and expression which is not limited by the boundaries of any of our religious communities. If we do not respect the mind's right to come to its own conclusions without invoking any external pressures to keep it from moving into territory that is foreign or even repellent to us we do violence to the mind's integrity. Even if we may be taught by our traditions that the highest freedom is freedom to believe what is true, if this adherence to truth is dependent upon manipulations and subtle intimidations, it is hollow and unreal. Religious freedom which is fulfilled in the freedom to believe often begins as freedom to deny and it is soon corrupted if on the way it is kept on a safe path by coercion of any kind. This does not mean cheap tolerance of all ideas but it does mean a deep concern to refrain from violence to the conscience of any man. When the formula, "error has no rights," is translated into the formula, "persons in error have no rights," it will be generally rejected by the representatives of all of our religious communities.

The guardians of religious traditions must take a step beyond this formal admission that religious liberty includes liberty to reject all types of historic religion. They should all confess that each one of our great traditions is often found in distorted forms and quite naturally produces the

revulsions which lead many honest souls to atheism or to some non-theistic Humanism. Each one of our traditions is so many-sided that some adherents, even whole religious institutions, can come to embody one emphasis at the expense of another and the result may be a great distortion. There are forms of religion which are an affront to the minds and consciences of many persons and if they do not discover other expressions of religion, they are likely to reject all traditional forms of religion because of their honesty and of their moral sensitivity. The ways in which religion has been used to give moral sanction to injustice, to slavery and to segregation, to the exploitation of the workers under early capitalism, to an uncritical national imperialism, to most forms of bigotry, have created anti-clerical and anti-religious movements and they have caused many persons to develop new and unconventional forms of religious expression. The Churches can always learn a great deal from their critics and even from their enemies. Atheists are often the product of false images of God or of the efforts of religious communities to capture God for their own purposes. I doubt if there is a greater failure in the life of the Christian Churches, Catholic and Protestant, than the failure to understand in time the moral meaning of the industrial revolution and their tendency to support the rich and the powerful against the victims of early Capitalism. If the Churches had not failed at this point, humanity might today be spared its deep spiritual conflict between the Communist and non-Communist worlds. There would be many conflicts, international and social, but the deepest estrangement among men today is in large part a result of the response of Marxist atheists to the moral failure of Christians.

A Note: In 1948 the Assembly of the World Council of Churches said with great candor: "Christians should recognize with contrition that many churches are involved in the forms of economic injustice and racial discrimination which have created the conditions favorable to the growth of Communism, and that the atheism and the anti-religious teaching of Communism are in part a reaction to the chequered career of a professedly Christian society."

In that same year the Bishops of the Anglican Communion at the Lambeth Conference said: "We have to admit that the Christian Church throughout the formative decades of the industrial era showed little insight into what was befalling human society. It was still thinking in terms of feudalism. The Church of England was identified almost completely with the ruling classes, as were the Churches in Central and Eastern Europe. Its own economy had the marks of a dying feudalism or latterly of a bourgeois society. Apart from provision for the education of the poor and the work of some Churchmen for the emancipation of slaves and of children in the factories, it was slow to take the initiative in the desperate fight for social justice."

This deep conflict is not present within our country though our decisions and policies are often conditioned by it. American religious communities have great difficulty in relating themselves to the revolutionary impulses in the world, especially in the uncommitted nations. More broadly I believe that we who represent the great historic religious traditions of the west should realize that our own communities often need to be challenged by the secular critic or the religious rebel. We are the better for being put on our mettle in this way. I doubt if Christians, Catholic or Protes-

tant, would have ever done enough to defend the religious liberty of all men if there had not been this kind of challenge stemming from the 18th century Enlightenment. I doubt if Christians, Catholic or Protestant, would have come to care about the intellectual freedom of science, if scientists had not often defied religious authorities and won this freedom for science. I doubt if the whole modern democratic movement that has corrected so much of the neglect and the injustice of all history and has given new opportunity and status to the working classes, to the colored races, to the dependent colonial peoples, even to women would have succeeded as much as has been the case unless many an attack had been made upon religious institutions. I do insist that many of the inspirations that have led to these gains have come from our religious traditions and that every secular movement requires correction that it is not likely to provide from its own resources. But those of us who represent the great institutions of religion always have a dual responsibility: to bear witness to the truth that we have seen and to repent of the ways in which we and our institutions have obscured it. If we look out upon our own country today in this spirit, we will not merely in a grudging way allow for the freedom of our neighbors who oppose our traditions to be true to their own minds and consciences, we will also admit that our religious institutions have often caused them to fail to understand our truth and as of now their witness is often needed to correct our continuing failures.

This recognition of the role of the rebels against our religious traditions in our culture should not mean that we ourselves are tepid in our own religious loyalties. We should

know that every religious tradition has its own characteristic distortions and that rebellion against them may be a service to our traditions, to our Churches and our Synagogues. Our faithful witness should do justice to those who have been alienated by these distortions. They are often closer to the truth which is committed to us than the complacent believers whose minds have never been disturbed by distortions of that truth. Yet without these precious traditions the consciences of many rebels would be less illumined; without them justified rebellions are likely to become destructive idolatries; and without them our culture would lack transcendent judgment and inspiration; and it would tend to represent a flat materialism with little to challenge either the cults of prosperity and pleasure or the interests of those who possess the dominant forms of power.

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